

Long Trek to a New Home by ConvenientAlias

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Summary:

In the midst of a mind-flayer-induced apocalypse, Eleven has gone missing. Nancy sets out to find her but finds Kali Prasad instead. When she offers to take her back to home base, Kali accepts.

As they travel along dangerous terrain, dodging demodogs and keeping watch through the night, they realize they might like each other. Kind of a lot.

Long Trek to a New Home

Usually, Nancy hated finding things she wasn't looking for. Ever since the Infestation (as they were calling it these days), such things were usually extremely dangerous. Often packs of blood-thirsty demodogs, or new manifestations of the mind flayer, or some extremely hostile pack of survivors, or a heap of dead bodies or skeletons. She liked to find things the way she left them these days, and have everything go to plan. Back in the day she had wanted adventure, surprises. These days she liked to think back on Jonathan making fun of her for being just like her parents and laugh. Yeah, she'd be fine with settling down in Hawkins to live a peaceful life, getting married and raising kids just like generations before her. Too bad that wasn't an option anymore.

But at the very least, she liked things to go to plan. And today was not going to plan.

"That," she hissed at Mike, "is not Eleven."

They were up a tree, her and Mike and Will Byers (a nice old tree, less rotted by the infestation than most), and with a set of binoculars they could see into the small camp set up on a hill nearby. There was only one person in the camp, and seeing as it was a short woman with long dark hair and dark skin, it was definitely not Eleven.

Mike made an excuse-me-it's-not-my-fault face and held up his gadget, which he called a psychometer. "Look at the readings. High psychic human energy in this area. It points right over there, it can't be wrong."

Nancy scowled. "Well maybe the mind flayer flayed your machine."

"Psychometer. Please, Nancy. We know the infestation doesn't affect electronics and..."

"I don't like this." Nancy furrowed her brow. Loners in the infested wild were rarely amiable and harmless—you had to have a certain amount of fight or cleverness in you to even survive.

Mike said, “Maybe she’s someone like Eleven. Eleven said she wasn’t the only experiment.”

That was reasonable. It still wasn’t all that promising. Nancy put her binoculars back into her sack. “Wait here. I’ll see if she’s willing to talk.”

Will said, “She could be dangerous. Maybe we shouldn’t.”

Everything was dangerous. Nancy touched the barrel of the rifle she had strapped to her back. It was a powerful weapon—these days they packed their guns with shrapnel instead of bullets because that stopped the demodogs better, and besides bullets were running out. “I think I can handle it.”

“I’ll come down and cover you,” Mike offered. He glanced at Will. “We both can.”

Nancy sighed. Not worth arguing, they’d probably do it whether she let him or not. “Okay, but stay out of sight.”

“Obviously.”

She descended as quietly as she could, the two boys following. Once she saw them fade into the underbrush, she unslung the rifle from her back and approached the campsite. She made a point of walking loudly now, crunching sticks and scrunching up infested, blue-rotted ground. No one liked being taken by surprise, and although she liked to have the home advantage, sneaking up on someone was not a good way to start a parlay. She called out, “Hello? I’d like to speak to you.”

She arrived at the camp. The woman she’d seen from the tree was nowhere to be seen. So she’d hidden. Nancy said, “My name’s Nancy Wheeler. I come in peace.” Sounded cheesy every time, but at least it was true.

And then there was cold, sharp metal on her neck. She froze and tried to regulate her breathing.

A slightly accented voice said, “Hello, Nancy Wheeler.”

Even out of the corner of her eyes she couldn’t see who it was,

couldn't even see an elbow or a leg. "I come in peace. I'm a scout looking for lone survivors on the behalf of the Hawkins Base. We're a force organized to resist the Infestation and help each other out. I don't want to hurt you."

"Then why are you carrying a gun for a peaceful meeting?"

"Precaution." She swallowed. "It seems warranted since you've attacked me with a knife."

A quiet chuckle. "That's fair. But since I have the advantage now, I'd like you to drop the gun and kick it away."

Nancy hesitated.

"I don't want to fight either. But I also don't want to be shot."

"I won't shoot you. I don't shoot humans." Except when she absolutely had to, and then...

"Drop the gun."

Nancy dropped it and kicked it away. The knife left her neck. Two hands came to rest on her shoulders and pushed her down to her knees. She looked up, but still couldn't see anyone, not above her or in front of her or behind her.

"Tell me about your Hawkins Base," the voice said.

"Well, we're located out of Hawkins, about two and a half days' walk away from here. We have a number of survivors gathered together, and we try to help anyone we can. We're trying to gather forces to possibly destroy the Infestation."

"You think there's a way to do that?"

"We know how it was started. We were there when it began."

"Interesting."

A person blinked into being in front of Nancy, dizzyingly sudden. It was the woman. Up close, she was quite attractive, defined

cheekbones and bold eyebrows and a small streak of purple in her hair. But that probably wasn't what Nancy should be focusing on.

"You want to take me to your base?" the woman said.

"I will if you want to come. I just wanted to give you the option. We take anyone. But if you know how to fight, you could be useful."

"How do I know that it's not a trap?"

"I have no reason to want to trap you."

The woman smiled skeptically. "I knew some people in Hawkins. They worked at a laboratory." She tilted her head. "You look a bit young to work for them. But I was young too, and they would have used me if they could."

"We know about the laboratory. They're the ones who caused this." Nancy wet her lips. "We're trying to end the damage they caused."

"They caused this?" The woman's eyes widened. Not many people knew the source of the Infestation, not outside of Hawkins Base.

"They caused this." Nancy nodded firmly. "They ruined our lives. We are not in league with them."

The woman nodded. "Interesting. I'd like to see your base and hear your plans. Maybe I'll join." She slipped her hand into her belt and took out a knife, long and shiny. It was probably the one she'd been using earlier. "But if you're lying to me, I'll kill you. I'm not fond of traps."

"Don't threaten my sister."

Mike stepped out of the underbrush, apparently emboldened by having a real threat that he could now see. He was carrying a large bat, one of the ones they'd filled with nails in the first couple weeks of the infestation, his favorite. Will stood behind him holding a large branch.

"You have comrades," the woman said.

“These are Mike and Will. Hawkins folk don’t travel alone.”

The woman nodded. “I am Kali Prasad. It is nice to meet you.”

It didn’t take long for Kali to gather her things. She hadn’t owned much in the first place, and in the Infestation she’d lost most of even that. Her truck, wrecked. Her friends, missing, possibly dead. Most of her things left in a building that somehow became a nest for those creatures whose mouths blossomed like flowers and whose teeth could eat through glass without injury to their gums. Creatures that seemed to follow her—she wondered if they could track her because of her gifts, the way Jane did a few years ago before this all started. At least she was able to hide from them. They were somehow more susceptible to her tricks than humans, that or she was getting stronger. She had less nosebleeds these days, even though she had to use her powers multiple times nearly every day.

At any rate, with the need to constantly be on the move, she didn’t have much. She had a few changes of clothing and a heavy sack of canned food and ramen, a thermos and a single pot which she used to cook anything she needed to. She used to have utensils, too, but who knew where those went? And of course a couple weapons, which she kept on her body at all times. And as many lighters as she’d been able to loot over the past couple years. Weaponry was fine, but fire was the only thing that could really stop the Infestation if it got a mind to swallow you while you slept. She always kept a fire going at night, and hoped that would be enough to stop it from welling out of the ground and eating her alive.

She wouldn’t mind leaving this camp. She’d only been here a few days, and even that made her restless. Wouldn’t be long until the creatures showed up. Might as well move on.

“Do the creatures attack your base often?” she asked Nancy. It seemed like they would constantly, with such a large number of people gathered.

“Demodogs,” Mike said.

“What?”

“We call them demodogs.”

“Interesting name choice.” Not exactly official or properly menacing, but at least it was something. “But do they attack often?”

Nancy hummed. “Does twice a day count as often?”

“I think so.” Kali smirked. She liked Nancy, at least what she’d seen of her so far. Nothing really seemed to faze her—even the knife had barely made her flinch. She seemed like a good ally to have. And she was trying on actually ending the Infestation? Now that was a mission worth attempting. Kali hadn’t felt like she had a real goal to strive towards in ages, but now she was beginning to remember what it felt like to be on a quest.

“Then yes, we do get attacked quite often.” Nancy took one of Kali’s bags and slung it over back, where it joined her own (lighter) sack and her rifle. “We’ve developed ways of driving them off. That said, you can expect increased attacks as we approach the base. We have my rifle and Will has a flame-thrower in his bag, but you’ll have to be prepared to fight.”

“I might be able to do you one better. I can make us imperceptible if the creatures approach.”

“Like the invisibility cloak?” Will asked, eyes huge.

“Sure. Like an invisibility cloak.”

“And that will actually fool them?” Mike said. He narrowed his eyes.

“I’ve stayed alive for three years this way,” Kali said. “What do you think?”

Nancy gave her a look. “I think we want you on our team.”

They hiked through the woods away before they came to a road. Highways were still the easiest way to travel, though Kali only ever

walked on them these days except when she got lucky enough to find a working bike or car, which she hadn't been in a while. There was less landscape to admire, but then again, blue-flaking trees and rot-stinking grass weren't exactly poetic anyhow. And there was less cover for any "demodogs" that wanted to attack. Or demogorgons, as the boys informed her Hawkins Base had named the bigger creatures.

"So you were around when it first got started," she said to Nancy.

"We tried to stop it. But we weren't enough." Nancy's lips were a hard line. Clearly she blamed herself. Made Kali suspicious—her instinct was to say it couldn't have been Nancy's fault, but what did she know? It could have been.

Mike said, "The laboratory people had opened a portal to the Underground. They used Eleven for it."

Kali stopped walking. "Eleven?"

"Eleven was a friend of ours. She was a girl the lab experimented on, and it gave her powers like yours. She was really strong. It wasn't her fault she opened the portal."

Was. "This Eleven...is she dead?" No. No way. It had been three and a half years since Kali saw her last, but no way.

"We don't know," Mike said. "She went missing. We were looking for her when we found you."

Kali clenched her fists. Eleven. She should tell them she knew Eleven. But she didn't have words to explain what they were to each other, and besides, she wasn't keen on telling these people about her past, even if they seemed innocuous so far.

Instead she listened as Mike prattled on about how he'd known Eleven, and how they'd been friends. Funny that she should find Eleven's family now, the one she'd talked about when they met, the one she'd said she was returning to. And ironic, considering Kali's own makeshift family was still lost to the winds. They were both stranded, it seemed. She wondered if they would ever find their way to each other again, instead of just finding links of each other's pasts.

When they broke for the night, Will revealed that the two large packs he'd been laboring to carry were large sleeping bags. Nancy rolled them out as Kali set up a fire. They roasted some only-slightly-infected herbs and mushrooms along with a can of tuna. It tasted weird but it probably wouldn't kill them.

"It would be nice if you'd share the cans with us when we reach base. Our food supplies are running low, and since this wasn't that kind of scouting mission, we don't have much to offer."

"What do you usually eat?"

Mike said, "Lucas and Max have started a greenhouse. Steve's helping with it." He'd mentioned them a lot in his rant about the past and about Eleven. Kali recognized the names by now, but she still couldn't picture them. A greenhouse. It would be nice to have that kind of stability. In their place she'd worry about demodogs breaking the glass and wrecking all the plants.

"And we also eat a lot of demodog steak," Nancy said with a grim smile.

Kali grinned back. "I've had a certain amount of that myself."

"And at this point we're all sick of it," Mike said. "So new stuff is good." He took a large bite of the tuna mix.

Will elbowed Mike.

"What?"

"Nancy, your cooking is fine," Will said.

Nancy laughed. "I'm getting a little tired of it myself. And I don't cook much of the time anyhow," she added to Kali. "I have other jobs."

"Like finding allies," Kali said.

"Yes, exactly."

When they were done eating, they packed away the supplies. Will

and Mike got into a single large sleeping bag unprompted, leaving Kali standing awkwardly beside Nancy.

"I'll be taking first watch," Nancy said. "Mike takes second."

Kali said, "I can take second."

"You're kind of our guest. You don't have to."

"I can't share a bag with Will."

Nancy shrugged. "I thought you could share a bag with me."

Ah. Kali bit her lip. She'd been suspecting that, but...

"We share bags so we can keep track of each other," Nancy said, "and to conserve heat. The nights get cold."

"That's why we have a fire going. I can sleep on the dirt when you're done with your watch..."

"I'm used to sharing. Join me. Unless you don't trust me." Nancy hesitated. "I can sleep on the dirt myself if you want."

"No. I guess it's fine."

But she was restless. She only slept on and off through Nancy's watch, and heard Mike get up to relieve her. And she was painfully aware of Nancy's movements as she slipped into Kali's bag.

She hadn't shared a bed since she lost Mick. It was odd to lie with someone so close in her space. Nancy was shaped differently, too, much shorter though equally toned. She smelled of sweat and smoke, and the scent of her drowned out the infestation-stink that Kali was used to living with. Kali breathed in deeply, trying not to stick her face into Nancy's shoulder to get a stronger whiff.

Nancy wasn't shy, though. She snuggled up and wrapped her arms around Kali. Didn't even offer an excuse, though she could clearly tell Kali was awake. She said quietly, "I'm surprised that you trust us as much as you do."

“You’re very trustable people.” Kali’s voice was rough with sleep.

“We know what the labs did to people like you. They hurt you. But we won’t.”

Words didn’t mean anything. Kali really had no reason to trust this girl as she did. Maybe she was just tired of not trusting, of living by herself and by her own strength. She always needed someone to depend on. Maybe this Hawkins Base could protect her for a while, and maybe Nancy was someone really worth relying on.

She turned over and let Nancy spoon her, warm and gentle. She murmured, “Just let me get some sleep.”

“Sorry. Good night.”

On the second day of travel, the demodogs finally caught up with them. Or just happened upon them—Kali seemed to believe they were always hunting her and it was some part of fate being out to get her, but Nancy saw it as business as usual—weirder that they hadn’t showed up until now, really. Fortunately they heard the demodogs coming, howls echoing through the blue-stained afternoon air. Nancy cursed.

“Shit fuck,” Mike echoed her.

“No swearing,” Nancy said. “Damn it. We aren’t anywhere near high ground.”

It was true. Even the trees in the area were weak-branched, no good for climbing. Nancy resisted the urge to curse again. That wasn’t going to help. She checked that her rifle was loaded instead. “Okay, we have one rifle and one flame-thrower.” The flame-thrower was really a can of hairspray and a lighter, but optimism was key. “Mike has a bat if they get too close. Kali, you have...”

“The ability to make them not even notice us. Wouldn’t that be

simpler?”

Nancy frowned. Kali had certainly been effective at their first meeting, but a pack of demodogs could be anywhere from four to fifty creatures, and prolonged hypnosis of all of them could be a lot. “You think you can handle this?”

“You said you wanted me on your team,” Kali said. “Trust me.” She took out a lighter and picked up a large branch from the side of the road. “And, if worst comes to worst...”

Nancy had fought with as little as a torch before, and it wasn’t ideal. She groaned. Maybe they should have brought Hopper along. No, he was needed back at the base—really the three of them had been all that could be spared. But she’d been stupidly hoping it really was Eleven’s signal the psychometer had picked up on, in which case for the way home they would have had more muscle on their side than a flame-thrower and a single rifle. It wasn’t enough. Not if the pack was large. And relying on the pack being small was a fool’s gamble.

They’d have to depend on Kali. But she hated it. Surprises sucked, and improvised plans sucked just as much. Even though she had to use them constantly.

“Okay. We’re going to hide behind this bush...” It was a thicket of thorns, but at least it would provide cover. “Will, have the spray ready. Mike, don’t attack unless they attack first, we’re hoping they just pass us.” Mike was a very aggressive teenager these days, and you really had to hold him back from a fight. Someday it was going to get him killed. She clicked off the safety on her gun. “Kali. We’re counting on you.”

Kali nodded. Her face was grave. “I won’t fail you.”

There was something about her voice when she was being serious. Even at a time like this, it made Nancy’s heart skip a beat. Not the time for it. “I believe in you.” She had no choice in that. “Okay. Down. No noise.”

They hid for a long five minutes (counted out on Will’s clunky watch) before the first demodog showed up. It was walking slowly, sniffing

at the ground. Two comrades followed it, then a few more. They seemed puzzled. They sniffed on the concrete, then a little at the thicker (Nancy's finger rested on the trigger), but moved on. One of Kali's hands was on her temple and she stared at them, barely blinking. Three more. Then more. Nancy counted them out of habit, though knowing the number wouldn't really help. As the tenth passed, Kali's other hand took hold of hers and squeezed so hard it hurt. Nancy returned the squeeze, but her hands felt weak. Twenty-four demodogs total and one demogorgon. They all passed, some faster than others, a few barking in frustration. None of them stopped for long. Nancy's mind was divided between watching them disappear down the road and the feel of Kali's hand in hers.

They were gone for a while before Kali relaxed her grip. But she didn't let go of Nancy's hand. With her other hand she wiped a trail of blood under her nose. "That was more than usual."

"They might be headed towards base, like us."

"You're very popular."

"The mind flayer hates us," Will said.

Kali snorted, then winced when it sent a little blood flying onto her sweater. "You and your names."

"You were amazing," Nancy said. "They didn't even smell us."

"My tricks don't work on vision alone. They fool all the senses." Kali smiled. "And creatures like that are easy. Humans are harder. Much harder."

Nancy's mind turned that into an innuendo and she fought a blush. Kali was still holding her hand. They were both girls, damn it. It definitely wasn't meant to imply anything. It was just her fault for having dated two very inappropriate guys, both of whom had absolutely no shame. She pulled her hand away and straightened her clothes, then got out of the thicket, taking her luggage with her.

"Right. Well, we may have to count on you again. The closer we get, the more demodogs there are likely to be."

"I'm at your service." Kali bowed a little, grinning like a performer. "Can I have some of your water?"

She took a long drink and then wiped her face clean of blood, which had dripped onto her chin and mouth. Nancy hated that she found it attractive. The blood had come from Kali's nose. There should have been nothing attractive about it.

Imagine that, except with the blood of her enemies. Demodog blood smeared all over her lips and teeth and hands. Imagine how it would taste if you licked it away...

Unproductive. Unproductive!

"We should get moving."

"I wish we could have fought them," Mike complained. "You said we're short of food..."

"Demodog steak is the one thing we're not short on," Nancy said. "There will be other times to fight. I've been tasked with keeping you safe."

"I don't need to be kept safe—"

Will nudged him again. He smiled prettily at Kali. "Thanks for saving us, Kali."

"No problem." Kali hefted her pack up. "Let's get going."

Nancy hadn't been exaggerating when she said Hawkins Base was a hotbed of creatures. Kali was exhausted by the end of the second day after cloaking them from another pack of fifteen as well. With a smaller pack of four, Nancy made the executive choice of meeting them head-on instead. It turned out Mike really could use that bat when he had to, and the flame-thrower was surprisingly effective, though now they'd used up the spray in it and had no more fuel.

Nancy shook her head at that. She herself was conserving shrapnel and trying not to shoot it all.

They had demodog stir-fry that night, despite the boys complaining, and Kali thought Nancy made the tough meat taste not so bad, considering. At night she shared the bag with Kali again, and Kali tried not to arch her back against her. She smelled more of blood and gunpowder tonight, and it was absolutely heady.

“You haven’t slept at all yet,” Nancy muttered in her ear.

“A bit hard to when we could be attacked at any minute.”

“Will’s a better lookout than you’d think.”

“I might need to protect us.”

“You won’t be able to protect us tomorrow unless you get some rest.”

Grumbling, Kali closed her eyes. But she couldn’t relax. “I’ve always been fighting,” she said.

“I know.”

“For some reason I’ve been more stressed today. I worry that I might mess up, or we might fail. I don’t even care if I die.” Kali had long ago accepted that with the world gone to shit, that could happen any day. “But protecting all of you...it’s been a while since I’ve had this kind of responsibility.”

Nancy’s arms were around Kali’s waist, and she squeezed. “You won’t fail us. But even if you did, we can take care of ourselves. We have for three years.”

“Everyone’s alive until they’re dead,” Kali muttered.

“True.”

She hadn’t cared if she lived or died in quite a while. But she didn’t want to see Mike or Will die. As for Nancy dying, it had somehow, in the space of only two days, become unthinkable. Nancy, in this world of blue-grey death, was an immortal woman. Nothing could hurt her.

Nothing.

Except it could. And that was what made Kali feel frightened for the first time in years.

“You won’t die, Nancy,” she said.

Nancy whispered, “No.”

Lips brushed gently against Kali’s neck. She wasn’t really surprised by them. She angled her head so as to give Nancy access to lick and suck, letting out a soft moan. Nancy laughed, but she stopped after a minute. “We can’t do this.”

“Mike and Will won’t notice.” Will was very focused on the outside, and Mike was already snoring.

“You need sleep. You need rest.” Nancy gave Kali’s neck a last soft kiss. “Later.”

It was a promise that made Kali believe at last that Nancy would be safe if she relaxed. Later. They could do this later. They would live another day to make a later, and it was silly of her to even doubt it.

She slept.

In the morning they held a war meeting over fried demodog breakfast. They were only half a day’s walk from base but it would be hard going all the way. Mike gripped his bat hard. Will gripped Mike’s hand hard. Nancy slapped Kali on the back and said, “Trust us. We know the ground, we know what places are safest and where the demodogs tend to gather. We won’t use your abilities until we have to.”

Until, not unless. They all knew there wasn’t a chance of their getting through with no confrontation at all. Kali ate a nice round breakfast. She would need all her strength to get through today.

Their track was through the woods today, it seemed, because Mike said the demodogs ruled the roads. Nancy described the layout of the base as they walked.

“We’ve erected a wall made of rubble around our site...”

Kali snorted. Erected. Nancy gave her a look, face slightly pink.

“...it doesn’t always keep demodogs out, but we have sentries posted within and walls around individual houses as well. For major attacks we keep an oil line around the wall that can be ignited by fuse. The oil line is eight feet wide and has proven to be our most effective defense.”

Within the wall there were about eight houses, one of which used to belong to the Wheelers, the others of which were largely abandoned during the infestation, their occupants decimated. A couple neighbors remained, but mostly the base now held random survivors who had made their way in, some connected to the core team, others of whom had survived so far by luck.

“There aren’t a lot of people left in Hawkins,” Will said. “Overall.” He fiddled with his hands.

“Mostly they’re dead,” Mike added. “We’re too near the portal. That’s why it’s our responsibility to get it closed.”

Right. Kali had almost forgotten why she was joining them. Not just because they had become friends and she was lonely. They had a job. She wondered if she’d really be able to help with it.

Before they reached the “Welcome to Hawkins” sign they mostly just met stray demodogs on their own. Nancy shot at them and they ran. Demodogs were not as bold on their own, and, Nancy explained, by now they recognized her. They knew that without backup on their side she meant death.

When they got to the home stretch, Nancy muttered, “Now would be a good time, Kali.”

They came into sight of the wall. It was about ten feet high—not bad for the efforts of a rag-tag group. But more importantly, there were about twelve demodogs prowling around it, as if they were guards keeping it safe.

Kali brought the shield up.

“The door is on the other side. You’ll have to make it look like we aren’t going in. The oil line means we can’t use fire or we’ll get fried along with them.” Nancy took Kali’s hand and Mike took Will’s. “All right. Together.”

They walked quietly. It didn’t matter—Kali was covering sound as well as vision—but force of habit. Kali didn’t want to talk either. She had to focus. Nancy’s hand in hers was vibrating, shivering. It was also soft and Kali wanted to stroke it, kiss it. Later. They were inches away from a later.

They walked quietly. Inch by inch, foot by foot. The door was made of thick metal. Kali covered the noise as Nancy turned a locking mechanism and brought it open. It didn’t squeak. They stepped in, one by one. Kali saw standing next to the door a man with dark, thin blond hair and a worn jean jacket. He didn’t notice them—Kali’s shield was up too high. Nancy looked at him with a smirk. She closed the door and gestured to Kali, still unwilling to speak. Kali dropped the shield.

The man hollered and stumbled back a couple steps, bringing up a thick bat in front of him. Nancy shouted, “Jonathan, it’s all right, it’s just us.”

“Nancy?” Jonathan lowered the bat slowly, suspiciously. “What the—I could swear...”

“We were invisible,” Will said eagerly. He gave Jonathan a hug, which Jonathan dazedly returned. “You didn’t see us, did you?”

“No I...I really didn’t.” Jonathan gave Nancy a look, then turned to Kali.

“I’m Kali Prasad,” Kali said. She offered a hand, and Jonathan gingerly shook it.

Nancy said, “Kali’s the person who was setting off the psychometer. We found her at camp and she said she’d join us.”

“Well, good job. I guess we should introduce her to the family. They’re in your house right now.” Jonathan jerked his head, nodding

towards a certain house, half brick and half blue-rotted wood boards. "But seriously. I nearly had a heart attack."

Nancy smiled. She patted Jonathan's shoulder, hesitated, then walked to the house. Kali trailed behind.

It was good to be home.

Nancy used to hate it when Jonathan told her she was a homebody. He only said that when they were fighting, when he wanted to go for her gut. Back then all she wanted was adventure. Now she thought about settling down in this house and getting married and living quietly like generations of Wheelers before her, and it didn't seem like a nightmare anymore. It seemed like a daydream. There was no chance of that happening. Even if they managed to close the portal (which seemed less likely every fucking day), too much had changed. Too many people were dead. Hawkins was too damaged. The whole country was too damaged, maybe the whole world. She didn't know how far the damage had spread, but as far as she could walk or drive, and the Infestation grew stronger every day.

Her home, this house, had changed too. It used to be a cage. Now it was a stronghold. She used to want to get out, but now she wanted to keep the danger out. Now she shared her room with three other women from all over the state, some from far, far away, and it wasn't just hers anymore but the sharing it made it more hers than ever. She still had her bed, though sometimes she shared that too. Much of her clothing she had given away. The things that were hers, the places and people that were hers, were hers to share and hers to protect. Home had a different meaning now. Home meant safety and peril all in one. Hers, but hers to fight for.

Kali would now be a part of that home too. She seemed to like everyone she met more or less, though some made a better first impression than others. (Hopper's first impressions, for example, were uniformly terrible and this time was no exception.) She

probably got on best with Max and Lucas, which was great. Lucas got on well with everyone but Max could be tricky. She had good instincts, though. More evidence Kali was a good egg.

In the confusion of debriefings and introductions, Nancy lost sight of Kali for a while. She found her at dinner later, roasted demodog (surprise surprise) with dandelion greens and some potatoes from Lucas and Max's crop last year. The dandelion greens were bittersweet, disgusting the first time you tried them. Kali seemed unfazed nonetheless. "You guys have a lot of food," she commented. "And you're good cooks."

Joyce Byers smiled. "Oh, go on. You don't need to flatter me."

"It's your cooking?"

"My turn tonight. It's not exactly exciting..."

"Home cooking," Kali said. "You miss it on the run."

Nancy had missed it herself, and she'd only been away from it for about a week.

She ate well, ignoring Mike's complaints about demodog again. Done, she headed up to the shower. The water and electricity still worked, for the most part—they'd set up a private generator for the electricity, and the water system seemed largely uninfected by infestation though sometimes the water came out blue-grey for a day or two and they had to boil it and put off showering until the rot subsided. Today it was clean, and she was definitely not—a week on the road did that to a body.

When she came out she put on pajamas. She would have gone straight to bed but Kali knocked.

"I need to speak with you in private," Kali said.

Nancy glanced at the other women who stayed in her room. She couldn't exactly kick them out. "Okay."

They went to the old toolshed. Nancy shut and locked the door behind them and turned on the single lightbulb that kept it lit. "Is

something wrong?”

“There were a lot of people in your room.”

“I told you we sleep together. We don’t have a lot of space.”

“It was inconvenient.” Kali stepped closer. “No privacy for a later.”

A what?

Then Kali took Nancy’s waist and kissed her by the lips, and Nancy understood.

She kissed back. Kali was hungry but Nancy was skilled. She knew how to trace with her tongue, to stroke, to flick. Kali’s hands on her waist tightened, then skirted around her waistband to the button. She undid the button, pulled back to give Nancy a questioning look, and when Nancy nodded, unzipped the zipper as well, and shoved the pants to the floor. Nancy clambered out of them and her underwear and stuck her own hands up under Kali’s knitted shirt, up to a sports bra that was too tight to slip under. With a whine of complaint she massaged on top of it instead until she could feel Kali’s nipples through the fabric. Kali moaned. She pulled her own pants off quickly, then grabbed Nancy by the shoulders and shoved her against the shed door.

“Careful. The wood’s rotted.”

“Everything’s rotted. This whole damn world,” Kali said. She squeezed Nancy’s hips hard enough to leave a bruise for later. “I know how to be careful. I know how to treat things right.”

Nancy kissed her again, tasting toothpaste in her mouth—she’d had time to wash up too. Then Kali was stroking at her clit and Nancy hurried to reciprocate, fumbling fingers at Kali’s wet slit. She didn’t have much experience with women but she had a little. She hoped she would be good enough to satisfy.

Kali’s hands were here and there and everywhere. They alternated between touching Nancy’s clit and vagina and forcing her back against the door when she shifted and bucked away. Nancy fought to focus—she wanted to make this as good for Kali as it was for her. She

was sure she was failing until Kali came with a gasp before she did, soaking Nancy's fingers. Nancy moaned as Kali choked on her name, a murmur of thanksgiving. She gave Nancy another kiss, wet and sloppy, and Nancy came with their lips still attached.

"You see," Kali said, "we couldn't have done that in your room."

Nancy's legs wobbled as she picked up her clothes. "No, we really couldn't have."

And then Kali was behind her, wrapping her arms around her waist. Making it really hard for her to put her pants back on. But she paused and kissed Kali, and decided it could wait a moment longer.

"They've assigned me to a room down the street," Kali said afterwards. "Them" meant Joyce and Hopper, the real decision makers of the base.

"I'll miss you in bed."

"You in bed all the time would be too great a temptation." Kali smiled. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Yeah."

"Good." Kali nodded. "I'll leave first. Try not to look too fucked."

That was a lost cause. But Nancy appreciated being given a moment to catch her breath. She sank down on the floor and sat still for a moment, running over memories of the past few days. Kali would be a good addition to the base. Not just for selfish reasons but, well, it was true she was the best thing to happen to Nancy in a while.

Maybe it was possible to find things you didn't expect and be happy about it. Kali was a good surprise. Though it was probably a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence to get this lucky, Nancy decided she wouldn't give up on finding good things. She'd found Kali. With luck, the psychometer would eventually find them Eleven. And maybe they would find a way to end this infatuation, and a way that she and her family and Kali could live in peace.

Author's Note:

This is...actually the longest femslash fic I've ever written. Which is surprising to me; I didn't expect it to be this long but also why don't I write longer femslash often? Something for me to think about. But I love that Stranger Things is a fandom that is conducive to longer fics for me--It's just a place with a lot of fertile soil for plotty fic, you know? Anyways, I hope you enjoyed. I'd love to hear from you in the comments!